

Final demolition of Pittsburgh housing complex makes way for up-scale development

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Demolition work has begun for the final two buildings of the Penn Plaza housing complex. Most of complex, which once contained 312 below-market-rate apartments, including 41 subsidized units, has already been razed as part of a redevelopment plan that included the building of a Whole Foods supermarket.

The demolition of the Penn Plaza complex highlights the lack of affordable housing in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, which is provoking growing anger among the city's population.

The last remaining dozen or so residents were moved out only last Friday, with the city and developers claiming they were able to find them places to live. The developer had initiated some demolition work, such as cutting down trees, removing ceiling tiles, and sealing vents, even while some residents were still living in their apartments.

Penn Plaza, located in the historically working class area of East Liberty, is slated to be redeveloped as a Whole Foods grocery store, 200 apartments, and 12,000 square feet of office space. This development will cater to somewhat more well-off layers of workers and professionals, such as those in the medical and technology industries.

In an attempt to offset the outpouring of anger by residents and a social media campaign against the project, Whole Foods has announced that it is temporarily withdrawing from the project. It may go ahead with its plans once the demolition work is completed.

Democratic Mayor Bill Peduto is now posturing as a defender of affordable housing. After giving the OK for the development plan, the city filed a suit against the developer, seeking an injunction to stop demolition activity. The developer has filed a counter suit, claiming that the city is seeking to derail business plans

that it had previously approved.

Like other Democratic administrations before him, Peduto, who took office in 2014, has presided over the steady erosion of affordable housing in Pittsburgh, while offering handouts to major corporations and tax cuts and public funding for developers. Tech giants Google and Uber agreed to move some operations to Pittsburgh in exchange for huge tax breaks.

Public housing complexes throughout the city have been torn down, some replaced with fewer mixed-income units, pushing many low-income renters out, while others have been cleared to make way for retail giants like Target.

Pittsburgh faces a dire shortage of affordable housing. A 2012 City of Pittsburgh report found that fully one third of all households in the city, or about 45,000 households, pay more than 30 percent of their income on housing costs. Of these, 12,000 households spend upwards of 50 percent.

There are 36,000 households in Pittsburgh with annual incomes of less than \$20,000. Most of these have to pay more than 30 percent of their income on housing or are forced to live in overcrowded, dilapidated and unsafe accommodations.

Thousands of low-income residents in both Pittsburgh and Allegheny County are on waiting lists for Section 8 housing vouchers, most for several years. Some 17,000 households throughout the city are either homeless or on the verge of homelessness.

Rents in Pittsburgh have skyrocketed. An unsubsidized one-bedroom apartment in Penn Plaza cost roughly \$680 per month, making it "affordable" for a family making \$27,000 per year or more. As of 2015, average rent for a newly constructed studio apartment was \$1,251, which is designated as affordable for households with income above \$50,000,

or 125 percent of median household income.

James, a cook at the nearby Children's Hospital and resident of Penn Hills, spoke of his connection to Penn Plaza just as final demolition was beginning. "My dad used to live there when he was little," he said. "He lived in the other building they tore down. That was years ago.

"When he lived here, it was new. I haven't talked to my dad about it, because he's been sick, but I've been seeing it on the news.

"My dad worked at a steel mill, the one over in Hazelwood. He's from the Hazelwood area. He worked at the steel mills a good while before they started shipping them overseas for cheap labor."

James said, "I saw when they first decided to tear this down that they were going to build a grocery store. They were trying to rush them out then, and the tenants complained. They met over at a church, and they were supposed to give them so many days before they had to move.

"I heard they kept moving the deadline when they were going to do demolition. Suddenly you only have a few days to move out. It's hard finding a place at the last minute. There are elderly people living there.

"I heard that they started asbestos work. The workers had masks on, and that stuff is floating in the air, and people get sick off of that. It's not cool. There are people still living there and you're taking out windows and stuff.

"They're throwing up other apartments, and they want \$1,000 [per month]. By Google, the townhomes that went up, they probably went from anywhere from \$1,000 to \$1,500 a month. Everyone is not making money like that, especially if you're retired."

James agreed with the need for a party of the working class. "The politicians, the only thing they're worrying about is getting their pockets lined up from lobbyists," he said. "They're trying to take Obamacare, and I'm not trying to say it's great, but they want to take it out and put in what?"

"The pharmaceutical companies are making a killing," he added. "We're the only country that doesn't have free health care for its citizens. Every other country that has a large amount of people, they get free health care. Not this country. It's all about nickel-and-diming you for every little cent you can get out of someone."

Niqiyah, a resident of nearby Wilkinsburg, spoke to the WSWs outside Penn Plaza. She expressed outrage at the attack on affordable housing. "Whole Foods wants to move right here?" she asked. "So we're kicking people out of their homes to put in a grocery store? That's evil.

"I thought they were also putting more expensive apartments here. The apartments across the street are like \$1,000 a month. People out here can't afford that. No one can afford that, they're looking for doctors and stuff."

"I've lived here [in Pittsburgh] all my life," she said. "I was mad that they want to tear it down. I heard on the news that they were starting to tear it down, and they weren't supposed to because there are people living in there. They tore half of it down. The owner said, 'We were just trying to do minor things.' No. There are still people living in there. You don't do stuff like that.

"There are a lot of old people living here too. My ex-fiance's best friend was living with his mom, his mother was living here [in Penn Plaza], and she had to hurry up and find somewhere else to live. And then she had to go into the hospital after that. She was going through a lot."

"People have kids," Niqiyah added. "I have two kids, and their dad is at work all day. He goes to work at 7 o'clock in the morning, and doesn't come home until 1 o'clock at night. He has to work two jobs to take care of our kids. It's really hard. This was affordable housing, and they're knocking it down."



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